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ABSTRACT

In order to ascertain whether distinctive patterns of selectivity exist among young aspirants to professional careers in education and health situses, data from a survey of high school seniors (N=1,500) in four northeast and two southeast Alabama counties and from three selected urban high schools adjacent to the northeast counties were examined. The variables employed were: race (white and black), sex, place of residence (city, town, country, and farm), and academic performance. Respondents were asked to identify both career choice and rationale for career choice. Findings indicated: the only major source of career selectivity existed along sex lines; there was little support for the contention that education represents a more easily attainable point of entry into the professions for black, rural, and less academically successful youth than the health situs; youth aspiring to education careers were more motivated by humanitarian considerations than those aspiring to the health professions; when sex was held constant, several distinctive attitudinal differences were observed between youth aspiring to careers in education and health. Since these data failed to consistently show any extensive selectivity of youth aspiring to professional careers, it was suggested that perhaps these considerations were not as meaningful at the level of aspiration as they might have been at the level of expectation. (JC)

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AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS AND RURAL SOCIOLOGY

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PRESENTED PAPER

ATTRACTION OF YOUTH TO THE PROFESSIONS: THE PROCESS OF GOAL IDENTIFICATION[1]

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Sociologists have traditionally been interested in the way in which different occupations selectively attract persons of differing social characteristics. In particular concern has been directed to the social origins of persons who aspire to enter specific occupations (Pavalko, 1970:345; Blau and Duncan, 1967:295). However, little attention has been given to "the complex processes and associated factors that affect the tracking of certain young people toward careers" (Schwarzweller and Lyson, 1976:2).

Large numbers of youth aspire to professional occupations, and especially to careers in the education and health situses (Alexander and Eckland, 1974:675). The choice of a career situs is a complex one. Not all situses are equally attractive to youth aspiring to professional careers. The basis for this contention is the theoretical presence of a latent hierarchy of professional career fields. More specifically, occupations in the education situs are ranked generally lower in skill level, social status, and difficulty of attainment than occupations in other situses and particularly in the health situs.

Schwarzweller and Lyson (1976:4) suggest that a career in education and specifically in teaching may serve as a comfortable career "refuge" for youth who view their opportunities for vertical mobility restricted by social, economic or personal characteristics. Conceived in this manner, careers in education may serve "as a transitional stage on a ladder of upward intergenerational mobility" for ambitious youth from handicapping backgrounds. Among the restricting characteristics most often mentioned in this context are sex, race, residence, and academic performance. Access to the full range of career options is restricted for youth who are female, black, from a rural area and exhibiting only average academic performance. Consequently, youth possessing these characteristics are most likely to seek careers in the educational situs, whereas youth who are male, white, urban-reared and above average students are drawn to the more prestigious careers in the health situs.

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Study Objective

This paper focuses on the question of selectivity among youth aspiring to education and health careers. Emphasis is on the critical decision point represented by the completion of the public school experience and commitment to long-range career goals. The research question addressed is whether selectivity exists at this critical point in terms of which youth aspire to careers in these two prominent professional situses.

Review of Literature

Some sociologists have assumed that certain social structural factors affect youths level of occupational aspirations (Sewell, Haller and Ohlendorf, 1970:1014). More specifically, they view the job to which one aspires as conditioned not only by the preferences and desires of the person for a particular occupational status but also by a number of factors over which the individual has no control (Kuvlesky and Bealer, 1966:265). One such factor is residence. There is support for the contention that rural or urban environments represent different opportunity structures in that urban youth have a more chance to become acquainted with a broader range of occupational possibilities than do rural youth reared in small towns and in the country (Lipset, 1965:203). Greater awareness of occupational status differences and opportunity structures is believed to attract urban youth to high status occupations. Pavalko (1971:53) reported that among youth who planned to become teachers, the ones who actually did so were disproportionately from rural backgrounds.

A second factor considered a determinant of career choice is the individuals sex. This factor is often linked to career attainment through family encouragement and the availability of family financial resources. The greater the family's economic resources the more likely the family is to be able to afford extended education for its children of either sex, (Pavalko, 1968:49). The lack of family financial resources may result in the diversion of the children from more expensive and extended career tracks to lower ranking professions where the educational requirements and costs are less. (Psathas, 1958:256) found that limited resource families were more likely to consciously set aside or divert income to support the occupational attainment of their male children than their female children.

Race is a third social characteristic believed to be a determinant in professional career selection. Numerous studies have compared occupational aspirations of black and white youth (Cosby, 1973; Cosby and Picou, 1972). Sewell, Haller and Portes (1969;85) reported that black youth in their Wisconsin study aspired to lower level occupations than did white youth.

An additional factor involved in the process of occupational choice is the youth's ability to perform well academically. Sewell and Shah (1967:22) found that students with high grade averages aspired to higher ranking and more selective occupational careers, such as those

in the health field, whereas those with average grades were more likely to aspire to lower ranking professional careers.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected in 1972 in conjunction with a larger regional research effort. The data used in this analysis represent those obtained from youth in Alabama. The sample consisted of senior students attending high schools in four northeast Alabama counties located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains and two southeast Alabama counties located in the Black Belt region. Students attending three selected high school in a metropolitan area adjacent to the northeast Alabama counties were also included.

The total sample consisted of approximately 1,500 student respondents who completed questionnaires administered in group settings during the regular school day. All students aspiring to professional careers were identified by responses to the question:

> "If you were completely free to choose any job, what would you most like to do as a lifetime kind of work?"

One third of 493 students indicated occupations falling within a broad range of professions. However, two occupational situses accounted for 76 percent of this subsample. Youth aspiring to health careers represented 39 percent of the professional aspirants and education 27 percent. The remaining proportion consisted of a variety of other professions.

Selectivity in Occupational Career Choice

The research literature supports the proposition that different professional fields serve a unique role in the process of vertical mobility by virtue of providing easier access to professional status. This selectivity is believed to be most pronounced between the education and health fields and serves youth from disadvantaged social backgrounds and poorer levels of academic performance. Four selective facors have been identified with this filtering process during adolescence as youth form their career choices. The factors included are race, sex, residence, and high school academic performance. Stated as a hypothesis one would expect that youth who are black, female, from a rural background or poor academic achievement are more often attracted to careers in education, than are youth who are white, male, from an urban background or high achievers. These latter youth are more often attracted to careers in the health situs. Tests for selectivity among youth aspiring to different professions are presented in Table 1.

Race. Only a slightly larger percentage (3%) of youth aspiring to educational careers than to careers in the health field were black. Theoretically a teaching career was expected to serve as the most attractive point of entry into the professions for a larger proportion of

blacks than the health field. Instead, these data revealed that a variety of professions in fields other than education and health attracted a slightly larger proportion of blacks. The observed differences were small, however, and admission to the health situs as a professional appeared at the aspiration level to be only slightly more restrictive as a point of professional entry than the educational situs.

Sex. The most critical factor in the choice of a professional career proved to be sex. Relatively few youth aspiring to careers in education were males (20%) compared to more than half (53%) of those aspiring to careers in the health field. The sex distinction in potential entrants to these two career fields was further highlighted by the intermediate proportion of males (34%) that aspired to other professional career alternatives. The education situs was clearly a female career track while the health situs was male dominant inspite of including traditionally female careers in nursing.

Residence. This variable like race provided only slight support for the concept of professional career selectivity. Farm and country residents were only slightly more prevalent among youth aspiring to educational careers than among those aspiring to health careers (4% and 1%). Because of the small differences, youth aspiring to other professions did not consistently occupy an intermediate position between the educational and health careers. Only in the cases of farm and town reared youth did this occur.

High School Grade Average. This factor was represented by the student's perception of his or her high school achievement evaluated as an 'A', 'B', 'C' or 'D' average. Although not statistically significant these existed a patterned relationship between grades and career choice. Youth aspiring to educational careers were less likely to be 'A' students and more likely to be 'C' students than aspirants to health careers. On the other hand, youth aspiring to health careers were most likely to perceive themselves as 'A' students. Youth aspiring to other professions again held an intermediate position.

Occupational Attitudes

Research in the area of occupational aspirations often gives the impression that the desires of youth selecting careers in the teaching fields differ not only in terms of who is attracted but also in the attitudes held toward the goals to be attained. Careers in education generally involve only a 4-year college program for initial entry and require less time and financial resources than many of the professional careers in the health situs. Careers in the latter field involve additional years of high cost training beyond the baccalaureate before admission to the field. By comparison, 4 years of college work is the basic admission requirement for educational careers, although additional training specialization is often required for career advancement.

In order to determine the nature of possible differences in the perceptions of conditions relating to the choice of a career field, students were asked to respond to two series of items, one indicating reasons for desiring a particular career and the other, things potentially preventing them from attaining their career goals, Table 2. Only those items which were found significant for either males or females at the .05 probability level are discussed. Throughout this section sex was held constant because of its logical and verified significance in the choice of education and health careers.

Reasons for Career Choice. Attitudes surrounding the choice of a professional career were determined from responses obtained to the questions:

> "Now think of the job you said you would most like to have and circle the reason or reasons that best explain(s) why you desire this kind of work."

A series of twelve reasons were listed. Significant differentiation was found to exist on seven reasons for either or both males and females aspiring to education and health careers. Only three of the reasons were applicable to both males and females - it pays good money, it matches my ability, and I can help other people.

Response patterns revealed that youth in the health fields were more likely to give good pay, being ones own boss, job security and excitement as reasons for their choice. Youth aspiring to careers in education were more likely to emphasize reasons such as knowing a lot about it, matching their ability and helping others. In several instances however, youth aspiring to other professions than education and health were found to be in a polar rather than the intermediate position anticipated. Aspirants to other professions were least likely to indicate knowing a lot about it, matching their ability and, for males but not for females, exciting work. Also, youth aspiring to other careers were most likely to emphasize the importance of job security, helping others and, for females but not males, good pay.

Considering only differences in the proportion of youth aspiring to careers in either the education or health fields who indicated various reasons for their choice, it was observed that a few reasons especially stood out. One of these was helping others. Although 40 percent of the males and 50 percent of the females desiring health careers stressed this motivation, the proportions of males and females in education careers were 20 and 25 percent higher. Similarly, the emphasis on good pay was considerably more prominent among aspirants to health careers than to education careers. The differences were 22 percent among females and 50 percent among males. For males, reasons such as being one's own boss and exciting work also differentiated education and health careers by 24 and 18 percent with those in health careers assigning these motives the greater importance.

Conditions Preventing Occupational Goal Attainment. Another attitudinal factor is the anticipation of conditions or events that might serve as preventive measures in the attainment of one's career goal. The question used to determine this was:

> "Which of the following things might either prevent or make it difficult for you to get the kind of job you would most like to have?"

Nine responses were provided from which all conditions that applied were to be checked.

The data revealed that none of the conditions presented differentiated significantly between both males and females aspiring to education and health careers. However, five conditions did differentiate for one or the other sex grouping-two for males and three for females. Conditions such as the family expects another occupation and lack of experience were the distinguishing conditions for males while overcrowding in this field, age or sex discrimination and lack of such work in the area were distinctive for females.

Females aspiring to careers in education were much more likely to indicate that overcrowding might prevent their entering the field than were those with health career goals. More than 40 percent of the girls in education gave this as a potential hinderance compared to only 14 percent of those in the health situs. Among males a similar pattern existed but the difference was much less pronounced. Males in education were more likely to indicate a conflict of occupational expectations with parents than was noted for those in the health field. The difference among the males was 12 percent but only 3 percent for females. More importantly parent-child conflict over the child's career goal was limited to a small proportion of all youth.

Discrimination in hiring based on age and sex was virtually of no concern to males in any professional career field, but was seen as a selective factor by 20 percent of the females in health careers. This proportion was 16 percent larger than among females in the educational situs. Similarly, females in the health field viewed the lack of local occupational opportunities as more of a handicapped condition than did those in education. This factor was both less important among males and less distinctive between the two career fields.

Overall, none of the hindering conditions are viewed by a majority of these youth as major obstacles to the attainment of their career goals in either education, health or other situs categories.

Conclusions

The findings with regards to the existance of distinctive patterns of selectivity among aspirants to professional careers in the education and health situses are inconsistent at best. The only major source of career selectivity exists along sex lines. Even though male oriented

occupations such as coach and administrator are encompassed within the education situs and nurse and lab technician within the health situs, there exists a clear pattern of sex difference among youth aspiring to careers in each. Beyond this, little support was found for the contention that education represents a more easily attainable point of entry into the professions for black, rural and less academically successful youth than the health situs.

Attitudes relating to the attainment of professional career goals reinforces the above findings. Two personal characteristics - race and ability - were included as potential hinderances which would force youth into careers in education. Neither of these characteristics were perceived as major factors impeding one's career goals. Nevertheless attitudinal selectivity did exist between career aspirants. Most interesting was the greater emphasis on humanitarian motives among youth aspiring to careers in education than among those in health. Youth oriented to health careers were strongly motivated by economic considerations. This finding, although very realistic, is not necessarily reassuring to anyone with tradional views of the motivation among professional persons in health careers to "serve their fellow man."

When sex was held constant several distinctive attitudinal differences were observed between youth aspiring to careers in education and health. There is a clear indication that different kinds of conditions are perceived by males and females as potential barriers to the attainment of their career goals.

These data fail to consistently show any extensive selectivity of youth aspiring to professional careers in broadly defined occupational situses. Aside from the traditional sex differences which continue to play a significant role in career choice at the professional level, other background factors reveal little selective impact. Such a finding suggests that perhaps these considerations are not as meaningful at the level of aspirations as they may be at the level of expectations and ultimately in the actual attainment of professional career statuses. Further research may be warranted into professional career tracking.

Table 1. Race, Sex, Residence and Academic Performance Selectivity Among Youth Aspiring to Education, Health and Other Professional Career Situses.

	Job aspiration		
	Education	Other	Health
Race			
White	86.6	85.0	89.9
Black	13.4	15.0	10.2
Number	(134)	(193)	(166)
X^2 = .456 d.f. = 1 p = NS			
Sex			
Male	20.1	34.2	53.0
Female	79.9	65.8	47.0
Number	(134)	(193)	(166)
X^2 = 32.498 d.f. = 1 p = .001			
Area of residence			
City	56.0	55.7	57.2
Town	9.0	10.4	12.7
Country	20.1	20.3	19.3
Farm	14.9	13.5	10.8
Number	(134)	(192)	(166)
X^2 = 1.945 d.f. = 3 p = NS			
High School Grade Level			
A average	18.9	19.8	23.3
B average	57.6	58.3	55.2
C average	23.5	21.9	21.5
Number	(132)	(187)	(163)
X^2 = .857 d.f. = 2 p = NS			

Missing observations = 11

Table 2. Occupational Attitudes of Males and Females Aspiring to Education, Health and Other Professional Career Situses.

Reasons for desiring this job	Job aspiration: Females					Males				
	Education	Other	Health	X^2	P*	Education	Other	Health	X^2	P*
	% Yes					% Yes				
Know a lot about it	14.0	5.5	9.0	4.997	NS	37.0	6.2	19.3	13.292	S
Pays good money	14.1	38.6	35.9	18.907	S	11.1	60.0	60.2	22.127	S
Matches my ability	34.6	12.6	32.1	17.722	S	44.4	16.9	31.8	8.145	S
Can be my own boss	1.9	3.1	6.4	2.824	NS	3.7	32.3	27.3	8.470	S
Offers security	10.3	18.9	12.8	3.710	NS	11.1	36.9	22.7	7.609	S
Exciting work	31.8	41.7	43.6	3.437	NS	25.9	20.0	43.2	9.775	S
Help other people	75.7	85.8	50.0	32.207	S	59.3	66.2	39.8	11.058	S
Things which might prevent getting desired job										
Its becoming overcrowded	41.1	7.9	14.1	41.778	S	33.3	12.2	21.6	5.543	NS
Persons of my age & sex not usually hired	3.7	15.7	19.2	11.965	S	3.7	0.0	5.7	3.759	NS
Lack of experience	15.9	26.0	20.5	3.574	NS	11.1	18.5	31.8	6.520	S
Work not available	13.1	7.9	25.6	12.731	S	3.7	4.6	12.5	3.933	NS
Family expects me to do other work	12.1	8.7	9.0	0.897	NS	14.8	1.5	2.3	10.199	S

*Significant at .05 level of probability

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